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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 BELGRADE 000101

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: MONTENEGRIN INDEPENDENCE REFERENDUM NOTES: PARTIES
DISPUTE ROLE OF POLICE

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED - PLEASE HANDLE ACCORDINGLY

REF: Belgrade 0054

1. (U) Summary: The beginning of talks on the rules for the referendum was postponed until at least January 23, as previewed reftel. The parties instead debated the actions of the new police chief in a December 29 local by-election, with the opposition calling to oust the police and intelligence heads, and the GoM admitting error but not guilt. Local media objected to GoM proposals to enact a legally-binding code of conduct for media coverage of the referendum, pointing to recent legal changes guaranteeing press freedom. EU Envoy Ambassador Lajcak returns to Montenegro January 23, but has already again cautioned all parties against making ultimatums. The opposition bloc in the talks will be led by the Socialist People's Party (SNP), which has stepped up its engagement with the international community. The Ambassador will be in Podgorica for meetings January 25-26. End summary.

Role of Police Debated

2. (U) Controversy over the actions of the new police chief in the December 29 local elections in the town of Mojkovac stalled the start of political party talks on rules for the referendum. Local media carried a photo of the police chief, Veselin Veljovic, whose hometown is Mojkovac, when he stopped by the DPS (government) local party headquarters after he cast his ballot. The opposition claims the photo is proof that the police are involved in manipulating elections; the Government claims it was an innocent, if serious, mistake. The GoM fended off parliamentary moves to sack Veljovic, but the opposition is still making his dismissal and that of the intelligence service chief Dusko Markovic mandatory conditions to open the referendum talks on January 23. EU envoy to the talks Ambassador Lajcak publicly cautioned parties against making such ultimatums, saying that "they lead Montenegro nowhere."

3. (SBU) Consulate discussed the Mojkovac controversy with Minister of Interior Kalumperovic (SDP) on January 19. Kalimperovic conceded that Veljovic showed poor judgment in visiting DPS party headquarters on polling day, but asserted that the chief broke no laws and has been instrumental in reforming the police. Principal Officer agreed that no laws may have been broken, but stressed that the Government must pay much more attention to not only improper actions, but the appearance of impropriety.

Opposition Maintains Demands

4. (SBU) The opposition SNP, speaking for the main opposition bloc (SNP, NS, and DSS) has publicly said that the formation of a government of national unity is a precondition for the talks. SNP leader Predrag Bulatovic emphasized this to Principal Officer on January 20. Bulatovic argued that, with the GoM nearing the end of its current term in office, a unity government would provide stability throughout the referendum, the writing of a new constitution, and new parliamentary elections. Bulatovic noted that PM Djukanovic had in principle accepted a unity government when an independence referendum was a possibility in 2001. Principal Officer reminded Bulatovic that EU Envoy Lajcak has both specifically rejected "non-parliamentary" solutions like a unity government and generally warned against "ultimatums" as conditions for the talks. She added that only the views of participants in the talks will have any bearing on their outcome, when Bulatovic hinted at walking away. (Comment: Bulatovic is not necessarily conceding defeat with his reference to a new constitution, as a new Montenegrin constitution is required whether or not Montenegro becomes independent. End comment.)

SNS Warns of "Riots"

5. (SBU) Andrija Mandic, leader of the opposition Serbian

People Party (SNS), continues to boycott the talks. Local radio carried his statement that the SNS will soon call its followers into the streets for "riots and demonstrations." Note: SNP's Bulatovic told Principal Officer that Mandic has marginalized himself by boycotting the talks, and was now "just a copy of Seselj, or LePen."

Media Says No to Political Rules on Referendum Coverage

16. (U) At a January 18 meeting, Montenegrin media outlets unanimously refused the possibility of political parties creating rules for media reporting in the pre-referendum period. Responding to an initiative of Speaker of Parliament Ranko Krivokapic, the media said existing media institutions, including a self-regulatory body, should instead be strengthened.

Comment

17. (SBU) "Proximity" talks in the Parliament between the GoM and the main opposition bloc will begin in earnest this week, mediated by EU Envoy Lajcak. The opposition continued to take a hard line, especially on insisting on a victory threshold of 50% plus one of all registered voters. It will be difficult to build a consensus on the margin needed for victory. The GoM believes it holds the stronger hand, given the Venice Commission's conclusion that the current referendum law (with its "majority of a majority of votes" (minimum of 26% of registered electorate) is "not inconsistent" with European standards.

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